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BOOK REVIEWS

A fanciful free fall into the abyss

THE VICAR OF SORROWS
By A.N. Wilson
Norton
391 pages, $23

By CHARLES A. BRADY
News Book Reviewer

SIMULTANEOUSLY with the publication of his latest foray into the realm of novelistic high comedy, A.N. Wilson has published another book, this one an anthology, "The Faber Book of London." One of the many London voices recorded in it is Belloc's epigram "On Mundane Acquaintances."

Good Morning, Algernon, Good Morning, Percy.
Good Morning, Mrs. Roebeck. Christ have mercy!

A Times Literary Supplement reviewer is puzzled by this comic squib's inclusion. Any reader of "The Vicar of Sorrows," however, can point out that it incorporates two out of the three planes of Wilson's new, brilliantly plotted, rollicking, yet harrowing, too, comedy of manners. The satiric dimension of petty parochial society, first; and then, an Anglican priest's descent into the private hell of a religious man's progressive disbelief.

The appealing first dimension, the mellow Trollopeian one, opens with a party on which the protagonist's mother, old Griselda Kreer, visits this sweeping judgment: "It was just silly having parties with too many people, all of them bores, and where many people, particularly the elderly, couldn't really hear properly."

Griselda's son, Francis Kreer, is the vicar of St. Birinus, Ditcham. (If Ditcham existed, the author remarks in a note of disclaimer, "it would be in the diocese of Oxford," and the novel's action shifts back and forth between Oxford's environs and London.) Vicar Kreer has reached an appalling impasse in his personal and professional life: "A married man, for almost 20 years, he did not love his wife. A priest of the Church of England, he did not believe in God."

Ditcham's Archdeacon, who will have so much to do with Vicar Kreer's fate, might have come straight out of Trollope's Barchester. "Neither a good man nor a bad man, he had left his ideals behind him long ago." He is conscious, however, that, in any parish, "church life, normally blandly agreeable, had the capacity to bring to the surface emanations of terrible malice." So, in the beginning, the letter from the sex-starved Mrs. Spittle, indicting her vicar for sexual irregularity, does not disturb him unduly.

There is something in it, nevertheless. If Francis Kreer is not so perfectly drawn as one of Barbara Pym's clergymen, if he is more wimpish than the agonized priests of Graham Greene and Brian Moore, his story is a riveting study in the fall of a believer into an abyss of unbelief. The seeds were sown as early as Oxford, where, with John Keble as his early hero, Francis Kreer, an earnest young Pusevite theology student, listened to his respected Ancient History Tutor ask and answer a question: "Do you want to know my definition of a religious maniac? Someone who believes in God!"

A.N. Wilson dons his vicar's clericals for his new novel.

The process is slow but inexorably sure until Kreer's harassed wife, Sally, noting how her husband's energy is draining away, concludes: "It was as if he had gone away, and been replaced by his own ghost."

He calls St. Augustine "quite possibly the least congenial writer he had ever read." Ivan Karamazov's difficulties about the problem of evil in the world become his own. He finds Western society, with its Christian foundations, no more than "a concentration camp with no kommandant." Eventually, he reads aloud in the morning, not his "divine office," but from the novels of Jane Austen.

For almost two-thirds of his book, Wilson writes a social tragicomedy, its bitter taste tempered by the quality of the wit. His third plane, now, is a psychodrama, the story of Francis Kreer's dizzying drop into an intellectual inferno. The fall is precipitated by three linked events.

His dominating mother — on one occasion this mummy's boy realizes that his whole life has been a "great Mommy-drama" — dies, and her death acquaints him, for the first time, with the reality of emotional pain. The pain is sharpened when her will discloses that her estate, except for a special bequest to granddaughter Jessica, is to be divided equally between the Vicar and an Eric Gadney, a man he has never heard of till now, who turns out to be a hero of the Battle of Britain and, evidently, a man with whom his beloved mother had had an adulterous affair.

A third shattering event offers Kreer a kind of solace, but one that ill becomes his marital and sacerdotal vows. Already on the verge of early old age, he conceives a sick passion for a beautiful young member of a hippie commune — Jay Dunbar, a girl who plays the violin as well as a professional and has no belief in a deity.

One of the innocent pastimes that used to lighten the Vicar's burdens was to read Virgil in the original Latin with a civilized old parishioner, Wing-Commander Ronald Maxwell-Lee. One of the texts Wilson does not address with Kreer's new plight, *Facilis descensus Averno* — "descent into hell is easy." He is forced to resign his clerical post. His abandoned wife finds comfort in the ambivalent caresses of a schoolmistress their 13-year-old daughter hates. An unkempt vagabond now, Kreer labels himself the vicar of sorrows. He becomes a skeleton in pajamas, a biblical Ruth-in-reverse — Jay's ruthless "people would be his people, and her non-God, his non-God."

Sinking into mania all the way, Kreer makes a "discovery." The Bible is only a code book for explaining our century's "Who's Who." Wilson has organized the long chapter-segments of his novel, except for the first, according to great ritual feasts of the ecclesiastical year. Advent, the climactic finale of his gripping psychodrama, sees Kreer, now mad as a hatter climbing into a Christmas pulpit in a decaying Christopher Wren church, there to deliver a sermon against belief, while his horrified wife and daughter look on.

The Realist remembered

Madder than Mad, a magazine of its time

CONFESSIONS OF A RAVING, UNCONFINED NUT: Misadventures in the Counterculture
By Paul Krassner
Simon and Schuster
352 pages, $23

By NEIL SCHMITZ
News Book Reviewer

RECENTLY IN The News there was an interesting piece on local "zines." Zines are personal magazines. Paul Krassner's the Realist was the zine of the century, and he rode it to the stars, became a big-time publisher, a celebrity. "Confessions of a Raving, Unconfined Nut: Misadventures in the Counterculture" is his story.

Some readers will remember the Realist. Just as the American glasnost of the '60s was beginning, in the 1950s was having its final apoplectic fit — HUAC and Hoover on the prowl everywhere, prosecuting, persecuting — there it was, audacious, to the left of Mad magazine and several flights up. As Krassner began to publish the Realist, he was in fact adjacent to the offices of Mad, to Bill Gaines and his motley crew. Steve Allen and Lenny Bruce were early subscribers to the Realist. Each issue had a sprite of outrageous opinion.

The Realist shut down in the early '70s. Everything was so outrageous, the magazine lost its singularity and was left floundering and flapping in the wash. Its '50s title was a curiosity. Krassner slipped out of hard-edged New York, which never really gave itself to the counterculture, and moved to California. Editors of zines, beware.

Krassner's narrative has a certain bawdy didactic 18th century swing to it, a kind of Hogarthian sequence. He would write for Hugh Hefner's Playboy, hang out at the Mansion, and finally run the operation over at Larry Flynt's Hustler.

A shameless exhibitionist for most of his life — and worse, a sometime stand-up comedian — Krassner admits here and there to certain regrets and repentances, insofar as women are concerned, but philosophy is not his strong suit, so his narrative races on. Some reviewers find the chapter "My Acid Trip With Groucho Marx" the most interesting. Groucho had sedate visions of Gothic cathedrals and heard baroque music. I think "One Flew Into the Cuckoo's Nest" is the most interesting chapter, especially Krassner's tribute to Ed Sanders and Krassner's Charles Manson story.

"I had known Sanders for 10 years. He was always on the crest of non-violent political protest and outrageous cultural expression. In 1961 he got arrested with others for trying to swim aboard the Polaris submarine. The next year he published a parody catalog listing actual relics, such as Allen Ginsberg's cold-cream jar containing one pubic hair. He sent he catalog to universities and sold the items at outlandish prices."

Sanders used to be a regular in Buffalo when Robert Creeley ran the Poetry Store. His readings and performances were always well-attended. He wrote "The Family," an important book on the Manson case. Krassner also got into that case, which the Realist intensely reported. In jail Manson read the Realist and wrote to dispute a story about his boyhood stays at Boys Town. The story in the Realist, "Charlie Manson Was My Bunkmate," by Richard Meltzer, was in fact a satire on the exploitative memoirs then flooding the press. Manson read it as straight, as a fabrication, and wrote to Krassner to protest.

Collectors of Mansonia will find here certain vintage Manson utterances. Krassner wrote to Manson that the piece in the Realist was a satire. Back from jail came this reply:

"Yes, brother, the world is a satire and I did see all sides of your story, Charlie Manson's Bunkmate. But I think in the Now with no cover. Most people take into their minds bad thoughts and call it joking. Some lie and call it funny. I don't lie."

I don't lie.

That is Manson's last stand. Those who saw his extraordinary parole appearance on Court TV last year will appreciate the resonance of that statement: He argued with his grim-faced parole board, contested their questions, explained how it was in prison. In that Now with no cover, he turned upon the camera the brave hateful glare of the cornered doomed rat, smart beyond telling, but caught, and at our mercy.

The last few chapters in Krassner's "Confessions" are kind of sad. Krassner goes to the 20th anniversary of the Summer of Love in San Francisco, and at the I-Beam, a disco on Haight Street, gives a thoroughly unmemorable speech on the signs and wonders of the '60s. He reprints too long a section of it and shows what a poor editor he has become. It was just that zine, the Realist, briefly bright, that was Krassner's glory.

The unfinished story of a basketball rebel

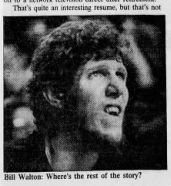
NOTHING BUT NET
By Bill Walton with Gene Wojciechowski
Hyperion
257 pages, $22.95

By BUDD BAILEY
News Book Reviewer

HAS THERE ever been a more interesting basketball life than Bill Walton's?

Consider his experience in the past quarter-century. The most highly recruited high school player in the nation in 1970. Star player for a UCLA team that won a record 88 straight games and two NCAA championships. Reached his pro potential playing for the Portland Trail Blazers in 1977, winning an NBA championship. Slowed by constant injuries for years until he was traded to Boston; served as a key reserve for the 1985-86 championship team, one of the greatest squads of all time. Moved on to a network television career after retirement.

That's quite an interesting resume, but that's not



Bill Walton: Where's the rest of the story?

Walton's entire story. Everyone who has dealt with him always considered him exceptionally intelligent. He's walking (or, more to the point, limping) proof of the dangers of pain-killing drugs in athletics. He refused to be considered something of a "Great White Hope" for the sport when there was a perception by some less-than-enlightened observers that there were too many blacks in basketball in the 1970s.

One other thing. When Bill Walton was in one piece — which wasn't often — he was arguably the best all-around center in basketball history. Walton could shoot, rebound, pass, block shots and work within a team framework.

That's a good start to an excellent autobiography. Unfortunately, Walton's attempt at literary stardom leads to a book that's merely something of a pretty first quarter layup instead of a game-winning slam dunk — a nice enough experience, but nothing you'll chatter about for hours on the way home.

Let's start with the positives. Walton has been involved with some of the game's top names over the years, and he has good stories to tell about them.

For example, Walton's college coach was John Wooden, who won a record 10 NCAA championships. Wooden already was a legend when Walton arrived at UCLA, and the coach is considered the classic country gentleman.

But every so often, that competitive spark would shine through. One time Wooden was finishing up a typical pre-game speech before a game with an outclassed opponent. But this time he had a different ending for Walton and the rest of his students.

"Men, the coach of the other team is bad for the game of basketball," Wooden said. "Your job is to beat them by so many points that they fire him. Tonight."

Then there's Larry Bird, probably the best forward ever to play basketball. He also led the NBA in self-confidence. One time Celtics coach K.C. Jones was trying to diagram a play in a key situation when Bird said, "Give me the ball and tell all the rest of the guys to get out of the way."

Jones reminded everyone who was in charge, plotted a couple of passes, and then concluded with, "... and you throw it to Larry, and everybody get the hell out of the way."

There are other stories about such people as Lenny Wilkens, Jack Ramsay, Red Auerbach and Kevin McHale. In addition, Walton has plenty of opinions about the state of the game today, his injuries, the Grateful Dead, etc. No, it wouldn't be a Bill Walton book without references to his favorite band. He has seen them perform more than 500 times, and met his future wife at a Dead concert.

So what's the problem with "Nothing But Net"? It accentuates the positive a bit too much. Most of the basketball recollections deal either with his time at UCLA or with the Celtics.

There isn't much material on his days with the Trail Blazers, which is surprising considering that the 1977 team that won the NBA championship may have been as perfectly balanced as any basketball squad in history. Perhaps that's due to the circumstances of his worst injury, when he took an injection of Xylocaine before a 1978 game with Portland and his foot essentially broke in half. He might not want to think much about those days. As for his years with the Clippers, well, they don't exist.

Some of the other personalities in Walton's life are overlooked as well. His teammates at UCLA are barely mentioned; you'd think he would have more to say about players such as Keith Wilkes, Marques Johnson, Henry Bibby and Richard Washington. It's surprising that Maurice Lucas, the power forward on the Portland title team who worked so well with Walton, doesn't receive more praise.

And there's virtually nothing about Walton's personal life. He writes a charming story about taking some of the dirt from Larry Bird's boyhood court in Indiana and sprinkling on his parents' court in California, so some of the magic will rub off on his four sons. That's about the only reference to his family, though, as apparently his first wife doesn't exist. Walton certainly has a right to privacy, but the omissions give the book an incomplete feeling.

What's left, then, is something of a long televised interview with Walton. The high points of his career are well-covered, and you can see he's a bright, interesting man. But you are left wanting more.

BOOK NOTES

THIS WEEK'S TOP TEN

Here are the best-selling books for the week ended Friday, compiled by Publishers Weekly:

FICTION

1—**Disclosure**, Michael Crichton.
2—**The Bridges of Madison County**, Robert James Waller.
3—**Slow Waltz in Cedar Bend**, Robert James Waller.
4—**Like Water for Chocolate**, Laura Esquivel.
5—**Bad Love**, Jonathan Kellerman.
6—**Fatal Cure**, Robin Cook.
7—**Honor Bound**, W.E.B. Griffin.
8—**The Client**, John Grisham.
9—**Without Remorse**, Tom Clancy.
10—**Smilla's Sense of Snow**, Peter Hoeg.

NON-FICTION

1—**Embraced by the Light**, Betty J. Eadie.
2—**The Book of Virtues**, William J. Bennett.
3—**The Hidden Life of Dogs**, Elizabeth Marshall Thomas.
4—**Stop the Insanity**, Susan Powter.
5—**Ageless Body, Timeless Mind**, Deepak Chopra, M.D.
6—**Soul Mates**, Thomas Moore.
7—**Having Our Say**, Sarah and A. Elizabeth Delany with Amy Hearth.
8—**Wouldn't Take Nothing for My Journey Now**, Maya Angelou.
9—**SoulLanguage**, Jerry Seinfeld.
10—**Men Are From Mars, Women Are From Venus**, John Gray.

SUSPENSE

Fill in the blanks

By ED KELLY
News Book Reviewer

WITH SO MANY crime/suspense novels running to several hundred pages, we turned for relief to Englishman Philip Daniels' 158-page "Goldmine — London W.1."

How fortuitous! Here, in less than half the length of the genre's usual entry, is a slick thriller with everything: smashing, cunning plot, just enough characterization to hook and hold readers, and a narrative that's attention-grabbing, crisp and swift.

It's a "big caper" lark with that marvelous British understatement that permits readers' imaginations to fill in so many blanks.

Simply put, architect Edward Walton, released after three years in prison for a crime he didn't commit, wants revenge against the business partner who framed him and made him a cuckold. Enter a sinister shadowy military type, "the Major," who persuades him instead to help steal a fortune from the strongroom of London's largest department store.

The meticulously planned and executed heist is successful, and Walton tops it all with his own ingeniously plotted foolproof getaway to Bermuda.

The guilty pleasure of "Goldmine — London W.1." comes from being battled through Walton's breakneck, exciting attempt to get back at the system which victimized him, and watch him escape with the gold and the girl.

"Goldmine" may be brief, but it's hefty.

GOLDMINE — LONDON W.1.
By Philip Daniels
St. Martin's Press
158 pages, $17.95

Beaten to the punch

The Rodney King beating and Los Angeles rioting of 1992 continue to be grist for crime novelists. Len Deighton's recent "Violent Ward" climaxed during the L.A. upheaval, and now from Robert Crais, creator of private eye Elvis Cole, comes "Free Fall," a megaviolent story built around a beating not unlike the King assault.

Exuberant, quick-witted Cole is not your usual snoop-for-hire. The Vietnam veteran is a hopeless film addict whose "big smile" is "a little Dennis Quaid, a little Kevin Costner." He favors Disney memorabilia, telling time by a Pinocchio wall clock.

Cole becomes lethally serious, however, when a client asks him to find out what's troubling her fiancé, an LAPD cop. Turns out he's guilt-ridden because of involuntary involvement with an elite group of officers who secretly are helping the bad guys in South Central, L.A.'s crime-plagued war zone. They're being blackmailed by a drug kingpin who holds a tape incriminating them in the beating death of a small-time dealer during one of their raids.

Savagery, bloodletting and body count mount harrowingly. When Elvis leads an assault on Mr. Big's crack house, you'll want to cheer, along with all the terrorized neighbors in that blighted neighborhood.

FREE FALL
By Robert Crais
Bantam
280 pages, $19.95

FOR YOUNG READERS

Searching for Laura Ingalls: A Reader's Journey, by Kathryn Laskey and Meribah Knight, photos by Christopher G. Knight; Macmillan, $15.95 — Laura Ingalls Wilder fans will be charmed with this family photo essay by a well-known author, her photographer-husband and their young daughter. The text, part travelogue and part journal, conveys a sincere appreciation of Ingalls Wilder's wonderful memoirs — and the fun and difficulty of finding the spirit of Laura in a much-changed landscape. (The Big Woods, for example, has disappeared, but there are still leeches in Plum Creek, Meribah discovers.) Excerpts from Meribah's journal effectively capture the child's-eye view of the experience and her connection with the Laura of long ago.

— *Jean Westmoore*

PAPERBACKS

Chicago Loop, by Paul Theroux; Ivy, $5.99 — Man leading double life prowls steamy summer streets of Chicago. An icy novel.

J. Edgar Hoover: As They Knew Him, by Ovid Demaris, Carroll & Graf, $11.95 — Abundant insights into its difficult subject who wielded formidable authority in Washington as chief of the FBI.

Black Dogs, by Ian McEwan; Bantam, $7.95 — A son-in-law recounts the disintegration of a couple's marriage.

The Children of Men, by P.D. James; Warner, $6.50 — Eerie novel set in future England, by a writer more noted for her mysteries. — *Ed Kelly*

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